

Following is my retying of a transcription of a letter written by Benjamin Harrison Wilson, which I received from Mike and Debbie Vaughan in March 2013 (Mike is a descendant of BHW). The original transcription was not dated, but it indicated that the letter was written about 1895. In retying it, I have made a few corrections, which are listed in the notes at the end. The notes also contain some discussion of many topics in the letter. – Mike Wilson

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In reference to my relatives, they were nearly all or a majority of them prior to 1800 born in Augusta County, Virginia, in or near Staunton, some lived in Penna. James Wilson, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, my Grandfather Wilson's half brother, remained in Penna. Grandmother Wilson was a Miss Yancey and an Aunt of Wm. L. Yancey of South Carolina – and she was a native of that State. During the early wars Grandfather was in the Army and was ordered from Virginia to South Carolina and while there he married. He was, so history says, about the only man of his company that succeeded in getting back to Virginia, a majority of them having been killed or died from the hardship of the campaign.

Grandfather Reeves, Benjamin Harrison Reeves, was born in Augusta Co. Va. March 21, 1787. So was Uncle John Wilson born there the same year. He was my Father's oldest brother; he and Uncle David Wilson, the next one, served in the war of 1812. Uncle Robt. Wilson & my father William Adair Wilson were both born at Staunton in Augusta Co. Va., the former in 1800 and the latter in 1807. Grandfather Reeves moved to Christian Co. Ky. about the year 1800. On the 4th day of July 1812 he was elected Captain of a Company of Volunteers at Hopkinsville, Christian Co. Ky. & went to the Town of Vincennes in the then Territory of Indiana to the rescue of Wm. Henry Harrison, afterwards President of the United States, & the Grandfather of Benj. Harrison, later President of the U.S. My Grandfather was related to the Harrisons but I do not know the relationship. Willis Long Reeves, my Grandfather's youngest brother, whose family still live in Elkton, Ford Co., Ky. married the widow of Carter H. Harrison. This was his third or fourth wife and last one. Uncle John was married (4) times. There were children born of each marriage. He lived to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of his marriage to his fourth & last wife. She was an Aunt of Thos. Shackleford of Glasgow, Missouri and a very prominent Attorney of Missouri. David R. Francis of Glasgow, Governor of Mo., & Uncle John were related by marriage. Grandfather Reeves moved to Mo. in 1817, just after your Grandmother Wilson was born. She and Aunt Jeannette Leonard were both born in Christian Co. Ky. My Mother was born on March 21, 1817. Grandfather Reeves was a member of the Convention of Missouri in 1820 that admitted Missouri into the Union & formed the first Constitution for the State. He was the 2nd Lieutenant Governor elected in Mo. Mr. Bates, a brother of Edward Bates, Attorney General in Mr. Lincoln's Cabinet, was the Governor. Bates died before his term of office expired & had Grandfather been at home he would have become Governor, but he had been appointed by the U.S. Government to locate the first mail route from the Missouri River to the Spanish possessions in the direction of Santa Fe – what is known as the Old Santa Fe Trail that runs through Colorado & New Mexico. So the Speaker of the House became Governor on account of his absence from the State & an election was held before his return. I think this was in 1826.

Uncle Abiel Leonard rode Horseback from Fayette, Mo. to St. Louis & then to Bloody Island and fought a duel with Major Berry of the Regular Army. Berry was badly wounded & died shortly afterwards of his wounds. Leonard was debarred from practicing law in Missouri for this until relieved by a special act of the Missouri Legislature. Judge J. F. Ryland challenged Uncle John Wilson to fight a duel. He accepted

& having the right to choose weapons and a poor marksman, selected double Barreled Shot Guns at 10 paces. But Ryland declined to fight and friends interfered & settled the difficulty. At that time, Ryland & Uncle John were editing rival Newspapers in Fayette. Ryland a Democratic & Uncle John a Whig paper. My people on both sides, Maternal & Paternal, were anti-Democratic. Grandfather Reeves was a Presidential Elector for Adams when he ran for President against Andrew Jackson.

I neglected to state that Gov. Boggs of Missouri acted as second for Uncle Leonard in the Duel. Leonard's Grandfather was in command of Fort Niagara (the American forces) when it was captured by British. Abiel Leonard, my uncle, was born in Woodstock, Connecticut; his father in Vermont. Abiel Leonard walked from St. Louis, Mo. to Fayette, Mo., where he taught school and studied Law. During his studies his eyes began to fail and he hired a tailor in the town to read his law books out aloud to him and the tailor became infatuated with the law and made it his profession. Both men were eminently successful as Lawyers. Leonard became Judge of the Supreme Court of Missouri and the other of Illinois and about the same time. I haven't time at present to write more on this subject.

Grandfather Reeves died in Kentucky on April 15, 1849. I was there when he died. My Father died August 28, 1865; Uncle John in February 1877; Uncle Leonard in 1862; Uncle David in 1844; Uncle Robert at my house on May 10, 1870. My Father had 3 sisters. Polly who married Samuel Grove of Va.; Nancy who married Mr. Loop. They settled in Preble Co. Ohio. Their only son able to enter the Army during the Civil War entered an Ohio Regiment & died of Chronic Disentery contracted during the Service. Uncle Billy Reeves' boys all entered the Army. One of his sons, Ben, was killed by the Rebels in the last Battle we had in Missouri. He was ambushed. Aunt [unclear] was shot in the arm through the window of the house while walking the floor trying to quiet one of her Grandchildren. The wound did not prove serious. Uncle Ben Reeves, Mother's brother, was in the Union Army, so was my Father. Cousin Jim Wilson, Reeves Leonard & myself all in the Federal Army. Uncle Grove's boys & Uncle David's went into the Rebel Army. Grove was killed. [unclear] Wilson is still alive. He was in Bledsoe's Rebel Battery. Your Grandmother Wilson's youngest brother was in Company C, 2nd Kentucky Cavalry, Basil Duke's Regiment, Jim Morgan's Brigade. I knew Basil well. He came to Marshall, Mo. when he commenced to practice Law with Letters of Recommendation to my Father. His people were Whigs. I have seen him only once since the Civil War. He said to me, "Ben, all I got was a piece of this Ear shot off", pointing to the ear. I went to Kentucky on Business just prior to the Civil War & he insisted on my calling on his girl, Miss Morgan (a sister of the [unclear] Morgan) who he afterwards married.

Harry joins me in much love & well wishes. Write as often as you can. Affectionately, your father

Ben H. Wilson.

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Notes:

First, corrections I made to the letter: (1) John Wilson is always referred to as Uncle J [unclear] in the transcription I got. I don't know if it was hard to read the name for whomever transcribed the letter or if Ben just referred to him as Uncle J. In any case, I changed them to Uncle John in my transcription. (2) In

what I got, Abiel Leonard is spelled as Abril Leonard. Probably a transcription error. I changed them to Abiel here. (3) I also tweaked punctuation a bit in several places.

About the origin of the letter: Benjamin and his wife, Olive, were divorced in Denver on 20 Feb 1894. Olive and most of their children (William, Maud, and Genevieve) left Denver and moved to New York. Ben and youngest son Harry stayed in Denver. This letter was apparently written by Ben to one of the children back East.

There are a lot of family stories that we are related to James Wilson, signer of the Declaration of Independence and one of the authors of the Constitution, but I have not found any good evidence for that (yet). I'm pretty certain he was not a half-brother of Ben's Grandfather Wilson. I have good evidence that Ben's Grandfather was William Wilson, and pretty good evidence that William's father was Robert Wilson. William was probably born in Augusta County, Virginia, as Ben said. However, James Wilson's father was named William, not Robert, and James was born in Scotland. It could be that Ben was just off on the generation. The Foster/Reid Family Tree on Ancestry.com shows Robert being a half-brother of James Wilson (which would mean that Robert was born in Scotland). I don't know what evidence there is for that (if any).

A family record by Adair Wilson (Ben's younger brother) shows William Wilson's wife as Catharine Yancey, born in South Carolina, and their marriage in Charleston, SC. I have always wondered about this, since I didn't know why William would have been in South Carolina. Ben's explanation here could be a key bit of information. It should be possible to follow up on William being in a militia unit that was sent to South Carolina, and I hope to do that. I'm assuming that Wm. L. Yancey refers to the famous pro-secession William L. Yancey, who split the Democratic Party in 1860. The ages aren't right for Catharine Yancey to be William L. Yancey's aunt, but possibly a great aunt? I hope to follow up on these clues and find out more about her.

The birth info for B.H. Reeves agrees with what I have from other sources. However, I'm pretty sure that John Wilson was born in 1790, not 1787. Another detail – when Ben says that Robert and William A. were born at Staunton, I wonder if he means they were actually born in the town of Staunton, or just on a farm near there (which would have been more common in those days).

"History of Todd County, Kentucky" (1884) says that Brewer and Martha Reeves (Ben's parents) settled there in 1796 (it was Christian County at the time; Todd County was split off from Christian County in 1820). An obituary I have for Benjamin Harrison Reeves says that he relieved Zachary Taylor (another future president), not William Henry Harrison. I don't know if there is a blood relationship to the Harrisons, but a Reeves researcher, Bob Reeves, told me that B.H. Reeves was named for Benjamin Harrison, the father of President William Henry Harrison. Bob said that Benjamin Harrison was a friend, neighbor, and sometime business associate of Brewer Reeves (Ben's father), and they were co-founders of the Presbyterian Church in Harrisonburg, VA. (Benjamin Harrison was also a signer of the Declaration of Independence, by the way.)

According to the information I have, Willis Long Reeves was married four times, and the widow of Carter Henry Harrison (Margaret Henry Edwards) was his second wife. His third wife was a Wilson, but

unrelated to us as far as I know. Elkton is in Todd County, not Ford County. (Things like this might be transcription errors rather than errors by Ben.)

Every other place I've seen has said that John Wilson was married three times (not four), and I have never heard of any children from his second marriage. It's pretty remarkable that he was married over 50 years to his third wife; he was 35 years old when he married her. The wording is unclear, but I presume Ben is referring to Thomas Shackleford as a very prominent attorney of Missouri. I have seen reference to him before as a nephew of John Wilson's third wife, Ann Robertson Pulliam. I have not seen anything about David R. Francis before, but maybe he was also related to Ann.

I have March 25, 1817, as the birth date of Mary Elizabeth Reeves (Ben Wilson's mother). B.H. Reeves was born on March 21; perhaps that's why Ben (or the transcriber) got confused here. Also, the obituary of B.H. Reeves indicates that he moved to Missouri in 1818.

It was July 1825 that B.H. Reeves resigned his position as Lt. Governor, and August 1825 that Gov. Frederick Bates died.

Some of the information about Abiel Leonard is mixed up. It was Abiel's father, Nathaniel Leonard, who was commander of Fort Niagara at the time of its capture. And Abiel's father was born in Woodstock, CT, but Abiel was born in Windsor, VT. According to a biography I have, Abiel studied law and was admitted to the bar in New York before he decided to go West to Missouri. The biography mentions him hiring (in Missouri) a young man to read to him because of failing eyesight, but doesn't say anything about the young man also becoming a lawyer. As far as I can tell, it was not Gov. Boggs who was second for Abiel in his duel. The biography says his second was Thomas J. Boggs, but it was Lilburn W. Boggs who later became governor.

Very interesting that Ben was there when B.H. Reeves died. Ben would have been only 12 years old (almost 13) at the time. Other sources say that B.H. Reeves died on April 16, not April 15. Abiel Leonard died in 1863, not 1862.

It's odd that Ben said his father had three sisters, but only named two of them. These two are the only ones I know about; I wonder if there was another one who died young, or something? (Or maybe the 3 was another transcription error.) He doesn't mention it, but Samuel Grove and family moved to Saline County, Missouri, so they lived not far from our Wilsons. I have found a little bit of information on the Loop family on the internet, but what I found does not mention a son who died during the Civil War. Too bad Ben doesn't give his name.

Uncle Billy Reeves would be William Long Reeves. I don't know too much about his family, but I did get a Civil War pension package for two of the sons, Benjamin G. and Ottaway W. Reeves. The pension package states that Ben died at home on 17 Sep 1865 of wounds received in a fight with Bushwhackers. However, as far as I could tell (a lot of it is hard to read), his pension request (filed by his mother) was rejected because he was in a state militia, not federal service. I guess the transcriber couldn't read the name of the Aunt who was shot in the arm. If it was the wife of Uncle Billy, that would have been Aunt Hannah. (I've seen some letters by Ben, by the way, and found his handwriting very difficult to read.)

Uncle Ben Reeves was Benjamin Harrison Reeves Jr. He was much younger than William, Jeanette, and Mary Elizabeth, but he was still already married and had a family by the time of the Civil War. Reeves Leonard was the oldest son of Abiel and Jeanette Leonard. I'm not sure who Cousin Jim Wilson was. The only first cousin I know of by that name was Robert's son James Madison Wilson. I have a short biography of him, which makes it sound like he was not in the military (it says that after the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, he went West to Montana where he remained until the close of the war).

I don't know much about the Grove family. There is a story in "History of Saline County, Missouri" (1881) that tells of a Grove (nephew of Colonel Wm. A. Wilson) who was accused of having joined Quantrell's [sic] guerillas and hung. Grove's first name is not given, but it must have been Robert W. Grove, who is known to have died on 30 Jul 1863, which fits with the date of the incident. I think the Wilson referred to was David's son Andrew Givens Wilson.

I'm a little confused by the last part. "Your Grandmother Wilson's youngest brother" should be Crittenden Reeves, but a biography of him says that he was in Company I, First Kentucky Cavalry. (He was on the Confederate side, by the way.)